

Transcript of Interview w Angelo Gonzalez

(Him) He is the executive director of the Council for Adoptable Children. (Maxine) Is Ernesto an educator also? (Him) He is a social worker, I meet him when he was at Coop, he knew my brother for many years, and they go back many years. He is just someone I got to know really well. (Maxine) When did you got to know him? (Him) I got to know him in 1991 through my brother. (Maxine) What does your brother do? (Him) Eddie was a professor at Cornell University. (Maxine) Eddie was your brother? (Him) Yes. You know Eddie don't you? (Maxine) Yea, I even did consorcier work when I was in college, when I was doing my MSW, I did a couple of workshops, bilingual work shops. (Him) Eddie did the latest studies, and Eddie and Eland got together about 10 years ago. They are doing well, they are living in Santa Cruz, California, retired. Of course Eland is still traveling doing the public health work. Eddie is teaching par time at the University, he is teaching labor studies, arbitration, and mediation. He is doing this just to keep his fingers moving. (Maxine) I never knew Eddie was your brother, and Eland is one of my idlest. I saw her about three years ago when she became the chairwoman of Public Office Association, and I was so proud of that because I think she was the first Puerto Rican woman. (Him) They are doing very well, both of them are doing very well. (He continue) So he introduce me to her book, and the name, I remember the name because their was history because of Aspira, because of his leadership at that time Aspira got into some serious trouble financially with the IRS. (Maxine) What years were those? (him) It was 1977 to 1980. (Maxine) Just before Roberto Soto. (Him) Right, because Anny was involve in having to sale the building in order to pay the debt to the IRS. They had a beautiful building. (Maxine) Yo me hacuerdo, that building was there for many years, when I was a kid we used to go to 5th Ave building. (Him) So they sold that building in

order to pay the IRS debt, An Earny was involve doing that period of time, he can tell you about the history. I don't know how many years was he there, but I think he was there at lease three years, probably more. You can call him and he can tell you about it. There were a lot of ugly stories. One thing about Aspira is that, Tony use to tell us, that Aspira eats its own children. (Maxine) That has been eco be every person that I have interviewed. But everyone still loved it. (Him) It just a priest institution. (Stop tape)

(Maxine) I guess during that period it was very clear from the greater the absent, that was like a black hold in the agency life span because not a lot of documentation has been left. No budgetary information is available. I could not even find his name in much..... I did found his name in one piece and Ernesto. But I didn't heard who was the board then or anything so I notice when I read your report that you say this was a Reno sans period.

(Him) Right. (Maxine) How did that get out side, selling out the building to pay that debt? Was their still debt when you came on? And how did you manage? (Him) I think what happen to me was that, and probably why I ended up as executive director of Aspira was because no body wanted to touch it. It was running a serious deficit of \$250,000 to \$260,000. The founders were about to cut Aspira louse, specifically the city. The Department of Employment, the Alight Contract, the Community Development Administration was another contract with the city that was also in danger because we were not meeting the deliverables for the contract. So when I came in in Feb.1983 things were very low, it was a low period for Aspira and also in the middle of reassessing of the board. Their were people resigning from the board. Roberto Mesa was the board chairman at that time so he was the first one I reported to. (Maxine) How did you come to be recruited? (Him) A member of that board Phil Rivera ask my brother Eddie it he knew

of any body. And also there was a woman who was running her own Hispanic consulting firm named Lurdes China and apparently they went to the head hunters, Lurdes China. (Maxine) Lurdes China was a graduate student from Columbia University when I was working for the experimental bilingual Institute in East hall and she came up as an intern but was so funny..... (Stop Tape)

(Him) She had reserved also the job order that they were looking for executive director. So I had heard about both through her and of course Eddie. Eddie had mentioned that Phil Rivera was looking to find some candidates so I then submitted my resume to the search committee that Phil Rivera was heading. (Maxine) Now, who is he and Gladis? (Him) Gladis Carion who also (Maxine) I am hoping to interview her as well. (Him) She is very important. (Maxine) Her name has been in the map for many years. Do you think.... Can I use your name? (Him) Absolutely! She will laugh. Gladis will be very important person. (Maxine) What about Phil? (Him) Phil is working in Philadelphia he is the director of personnel of the city, he works for the Mayor. (Maxine) So he must know all the Philadelphia Aspira people? (Him) Of course, he knows everybody over there. (Maxine) Because you know that the ex-director of Aspira Philadelphia now a deputy for the Mayor, Many. (Him) I was involved with during the years Many was executive director... (Could not understand the things he was saying because he lowered his voice) (Maxine) So that's how you came! (Him) Right, I then met with the board, and that's why I say to you, and I chuckle, because there are not too many people who really wanted to take on that job because they knew it was going to be a real challenge and it was close to six feet under as you can get. So they figured I had the reputation, you know from my family, with Eddie, and at that time I was working for the city, office of the Mayor, and I had my

MSW, from Hunter. (Maxine) Columbia, and Aspira people got me there because I would have never thought of going to Columbia. (Him) My wife got the MSW from NYU, Gladis was an Aspirante, that's how she got to college, through Aspira. So I came from the Major Office, I was (noise)..... so I decided to give it a shot at it, I figured let me try I didn't think it was going to be.... frankly I didn't think I was going to get the position, but as they saw very few people coming forward excited they decided to take a chance. They probably said that I had no bagech and he is bright and capable of taking it, so I took Aspira on in Feb. 1983. The reason I put Reno sans was because I think that was the time everything was changing in Aspira. Board members who were not doing much but leaving, Gladis Carion has just join the board, Phil Rivera was on the board, Angela Falcon was on the board, and they were really putting together a very very.... Luis Miranda, so they were building a nice board of directors started to come around when I came in and of course I started building on that board relationship. Gladis became the chairperson of the board of directors when Roberto Mesa resign and she took over in 1984 and was there the year before I left and somebody else came in. (Maxine) What year did you leave? (Him) I left in March of 1987. (Maxine) So she left before you did? (Him) Well, she stay on to help with the transition of the new executive director. (Maxine) That as Julia? (Him) Yes. (Maxine) What was the gap between you and Julia? (Him) Not long, maybe a couple of months, it was a short period. (Maxine) I think it was Julia who told me that Gladis was acting, I guess in between. (Him) Gladis was acting executive for a period of time. In fact, even when I came on board Roberto Soto left and Gladis was acting executive. (Maxine) So she has always felt in at least for that period of time. (Him) That's why she is so valuable because she works as a board member and as

executive until they higher people, both through my teenier. I think mostly through my teenier, I don't think their was much of a long period between Julia and I, I think it was maybe two months when that happen with Roberto Soto it was like six months almost a year. She was there a longer period with Roberto Soto. She is definitely important.

(Maxine) Could you tell me about.....(Him) You have her address, you know where to reach her? (Maxine) Yes, I think it was you or somebody else gave me her phone number and I call her but I have not got a response from her yet. That's why I want it to used someone name who knows her so she might make the connection. She does not know me from Adam. Tell me about the staffing you had? (Him) The majority of the staff was very good. Their was also a staff that was doing nothing, just collecting a check, that's why we were getting into trouble with our programs, because they are not really applying them self and working hard, so we were getting in trouble because we were not meting the goals for the programs. Their was very low moral, extremely low moral. The economic factor, people haven't see salaries increases for years, so people though why should I break my back if I haven't receive a salary increase in two, three, four years. So people there didn't see a salary increase for a numbers of years. And the salaries were low to begin with. So we were face with a situation that we were running a big deficit, the programs are in danger of being taken from us, the low staff moral, and a lot of needs in the schools, the need were always in from of us to have Aspira clubs functioning.

(Maxine) By that time it looks like their was only an agency in the Bronx? (Him) Their was one in Brooklyn, one in the Bronx. (Maxine) So their were three them, one in Brooklyn, one in the Bronx, and in Manhattan. I was not sure, because at one time their were so many centers, so by the time you got there.... (Him) The only ones that were real

centers were the Bronx, and Brooklyn. (Maxine) Did you ever directed around that?

(Him) No, that was where the main office was. They sold the building and they move everything to the Bronx office. We had Brooklyn, Manhattan, and the Bronx office.

When I took over they sold the building so they had to incorporate the headquarters into the Bronx, the merge of the Manhattan office and they Bronx office. So their were two

operation, the Brooklyn and the Bronx office. (Maxine) What was it besides the fact that you mention that they were not able to comply with the requirements of the deliverables,

was the word getting out? Was Aspira lousing its legitimacy and credibility? (Him)

Absolutely. The thing with Aspira is still happen to this day, many people come forward trying to save Aspira. Aspira reputation in the commitment and its philosophy always

rally behind Aspira. Aspira was like motherhood and apple pie, you just can't say no to

Aspira. Is an institution that has done so much for so money that many people came

forward and said, we can't let it die, lets do something about it. To this day its what is

happening. As Aspira goes through its changes there are always people who come

forward to try to hold it together. In my case I was fortunate enough that I was able to get

the commissioner at the city to give me time to turn it around. Commissioner Alvarez at

the time CDA, a friend of Aspira. I mean, none of these people, the commissioner Ran

Gold at the department of employment, and African American who I knew. They told

me, we will work with you to turn it around. So they gave us (the words he said I could

not understand it) and a time line and work plans that I had it develop to correct of

actions. So immediately my job was to stabilize our funding base by visiting and working

with our founders, and making sure that I was able to communicate to them that I will

turn it around. (Maxine) You just said something, when you, this commissioner Ran Gold

who you knew that goes to the notion of the leadership of Aspira and the entire idea that... even through Aspira is you know, like motherhood and apply pie, still the leadership of the organization is critical to its servable. So I guess they know what they were doing when they identify you as someone who could have those relationships or could develop those relationships. (Him) They knew through my relationship with my brother Eddie and my family that we knew a lot of these people. In my interview the knew I had those relationships, but more importantly they knew I had the energy to try to change things. I when with a lot of energy and intuition, as an Aspirante I also feel the same need and commitment to have to turn it around. So it was really for all of us, including the board of directors, it was a labor of love for all of us. We did it as a job and we also did it as a labor of love, we just felt that we were not going to let Aspira die. What turn around Aspira was the combination of the people behind them could not let Aspira die, like the commissioner. The leadership behind the sense were there to help when we needed them and of course internally the board of directors really dramatically changes to the board structure. Gladis own leadership was incredibly important during that time Gladis came forward during a lot of times. (Maxine) She is an Attorney? (Him) Yes. We reconstructed the board, Luis Miranda, Josi Nieves, high power people. Most importantly we brought a very solid administrator, someone who had a lot of experience physically, to be able to manage and get us out of debt. The third part was to raise money. While we stabilize programs our funding base, and programs started to come around, we higher some new programmers coordinators, highly energetic, committed coordinators to run the program. So programs were stabilize, we started to deliver services and meet our commitment through our funding contract. The board was helping

me raise money by building a board with people with contacts. I was taking advantage of those contacts. Also we establish a corporate advising board to Aspira, we started going out and bringing some our corporate friends so they can be an advisory group in how to raise money and help me to raise money. And of course I hit the road visiting foundation and corporation to raise money. (Maxine) What is the difference between foundation money, I know that in your report you stress to try to bring foundation money, private money, compare to city money or federal money, what is it about that? (Him) We as Aspira were in a deficit because we were not raising enough unrestricted money. Money that we have and we can use for whatever we want. General operation budget, which I can use to pay debts. Restricted money, like government money we couldn't do anything with, we had no flexibility. 80% of those grand's was to pay salaries and benefits, which didn't leave much money for operational things, like paying rent, electricity, and paper. We had very little money left after we pay salaries to be able to manage operations. So it was very clear to us that we need to raise un-restricted fund, money we can use to pay and increase and enhance our operations. So it was very clear to us that we needed to raise unrestricted funds, money we can use to pay and increase and enhance our operations. Same thing with benefits, salaries, we had to go back ones we were able to legitimize our ability to be able to deliver services again, we needed to go back and renegotiate contracts to increase the level of salaries because the level of salaries because they were being pay very, very low salaries. If you are not in a position of strength to go in and renegotiate for more salaries if you are not meeting the goals of the contractors. It took a year and a half of struggle to be able to develop the confidence level and the credibility level for them to be able to say, ok we will work with you in turns of

increasing the budget, because I had made it clear to them that we can't get good people unless you offer them good salaries and they understood that. So the funding sources work with me in terms of reconstructing the budget, to be able to increase salaries, and a better health plan, which allow me to bring good people. (Maxine) You have I guess a union of Aspira, I understand that the only association that has a union? (Him) Correct. (Maxine) Can you tell me a bit about that and was the union there when you got there and how did it affect the issue with salaries and employees? (Him) The union came as of a resolt of staff discontent with the issue of poor salaries, poor benefit, and lack of communication with the top managers. So the staff petition the union to come in and take a look. (Maxine) While you were the executive director? (Him) And before. This was under Roberto Soto. So the union cam in because the staff discontent and stressing to meet to interest and needs of its employees so they were able to bring the unions, United Auto Workers, and others. An as it goes there is a lot of doubts and questions about were the union belong in a non-profit organization as suppose to have a unionize workshop and transport unions, automotive industry, etc. The union was a problem, they were raising unrealistic expectation that they want it more money to staff salaries and benefits, but you could only get so much out of the government contracts. So the unions became a very, very.... They were not a partner at all in Aspira. What I had to do with the unions was to neutralize them to try to meet some of those concerns of the employees, which was dissent salaries, benefits, and adequate health insurance. An I did that, and so basically the unions keep quiet because the employees were happy. (Maxine) Where they more them one union? (Him) Just one. (Maxine) who was covert exactly? (Him) Anyone who was not management. Every body, clerical, as well as, counselors, professional staff that

was not management. (Maxine) How did that work, when you hire new people did the automatically had to join the union? (Him) Yes is automatically. When people were hire we made it clear that their was an union and that you had to pay unions dues, it was part of the job. Every one excepts management was require to do this. (Maxine) So who is management? (Him) Executive director, fiscal director, executive assistant. Anyone who work on the managerial level. The manager were exempt. For example, project directors who does talent search, those managers were exempt from union memberships. So their
 of Aspira was because no body wanted to touch it. It was running a serious deficit of \$250,000 to \$260,000. The founders were athing happen. They were waiting to see what the new executive director was going to do. An their was not much you can have, you can do because the contracts were being trentern, so the union was basically quiet and took a wait and see attitude. In over a year an half I was able to make enough in route with them to keep them satisfy, by virtually keeping the staff satisfy. Because that was the issue, the staff. As we wave salaries and working conditions improvements and made these benefits package more lucrative, at lease more respectable to staff people were not complaining any more. So they have no reason to go to the union to come and be (could not understand a word he said) management, as it relates to the employees, the employees were treated very well for the first year and half. As Aspira started to build an actual base an get out of debt the union started to maneuver. The fundraising, money that we were using to build the organization the union wanted to get into that. They wanted some of

that money to be use for salaries. So that became an act of war. The other act of war was when the union contract came up for renegotiations. There was a lot pressure for cost of living increases and working conditions that they were insisting on. We made it clear that we can only pass along whatever increase we got from our contracts. So the contracts like DLE gave us a three percent salary increase we would pass it on to the staff. If we got only two percent is only what we can pass on. (Maxine) Who was the union leadership? (H.m) The union leadership was mostly angle. The United Auto worker was mostly an angle union. (He said something that I was not able to understand due to the audio) (Maxine) What level of employees was that? (H.m) Second counselor. And of course he, as most shop students use that authority well (could not understand) their responsibilities as a counselor. There were times I found a union worker during Aspira work time. We had Aspira club during counseling and instead he was in the office with the union. That became a problem to control his schedule. As many shop students they have a tendency in mixing their work responsibilities with the union responsibilities. That was a very defining problem for us. (Maxine) As external agencies go one thing that I have noticed is, and the whole salary thing, counselors across the board in all the agencies feel that they are under pay. Do you have any explanation for why Aspira was structured that way? What was it that cost that to be that way? (H.m) I think we historically, looking back, when you look at Latinos not profit organization we were always at a disadvantage in turn in negotiating with the city, the state and the federal government. We were always because we were first and we were new, politically we were new, in terms of issues we were just building our base. In fact, part of it had to do that we didn't had the leadership, the political clout that the African American community for example or the Jews

community had in terms of negotiating reasonable contracts with funding sources. So we were basically in our very, very defensive position in terms of having to take what we can get rather than negotiate a good contract because we were never working from a position of strength. (Maxine) And you know what so interesting, people that are from Aspira and do great things, certainly it's not a matter of the talent that Aspira has been able to attract, but the retention of those people is where the issue begins. (Hm) We could not retain them because of the salaries and benefits like Aspira, and the National Puerto Rican Forum and all the other community agencies people will move on to bigger and better things. We had definitely talent, the problem was that we were not successful at being able to negotiate contracts and obtain reasonable salaries. And we were being asked because of our lack of political power and student organization to work under very, very, difficult conditions. Contracts with salaries that were not competitive by any means but yet when you look at organizations non-profits that are not Hispanic doing the same kind of social service work they were offering much more money for the same job and our employees would leave as counselors, and clerical support. So it was clearly a matter of being able of having more influence and authority and power to be able to increase the contracts, and to find parity, and to get a level of parity where everyone was getting a reasonable salaries. (Maxine) Do you think that this whole issue that you just explain and I sorta analyze that way and (could not understand) and important point you made. Do you think that, the fact that does people were reserving those salaries and were moving on and there was (could not understand) regular turn over the staff person. honestly as I look to year to year in the annuals reports the move of staff change tertiary from year to year. Do you think also was (could not understand) against the organization ability to raise

money, if every year you are going to have a new person and you can go back to entry level salaries, its done at the University level, all the time. As long as the person is not in that spot for too long you can go back to starting salaries with the new person that is working in. Is that a factor? (Him) Absolutely. You could look at it in two ways. The tension that the fact that we could not return employees impacted our program base. We could not deliver because we were having so many changes, changes of the same people living the same work for any extended period of time, so there was no continuity and consistency and relationship building as well. That is the key, you build relationships with kids, you build relationships with teachers, school, and administrators. Administrators laugh at us because they keep seeing different people coming in and out. So we were not credible in that regard. Aspiras historically has been riding on the coat tail (could not understand) of history, of the Puerto Rico history. Aspira was thriving on its first ten-fifteen years were they have six centers, executive directors of providences. That is how Aspira was surviving until this day it survives on the (could not understand) its reputation. That what really kept in many instances alive. I subsidies now, Puerto Rico has historically done very well, always. That was one city that we never had a problem but there is a lot of reasons for that. Pero the retention point is very important on a advantage side you could get to the point where you know you need to recycle people because you can't pay them enough salaries to do the same work but you suffer in terms of quality of services but from a budget stand point it can help to bring the budget balance, bringing somebody instead of paying them \$6,000 you get them at \$14,000 and you could get good people at 14. There were people coming looking for work experience at that level. (Maximo, There is a question I have for you. During your time at the agency

it seems that sort of goes inside with the changes in the demographics in the city and in the country. How did that impact on your ability to hire quality Puerto Rican personnel and also how did that impact on your student population? (Him) I think we saw a couple of exciting, very exciting and meet changes going on. We were no longer just serving Puerto Ricans students any more, we were beginning to service Dominican students, in huge numbers and American students as well. As Aspira close for the first time were beginnings to look like mosaic of who we were as a community of greater Latino community. We started seeing the leadership that was stepping up to be president of the Aspira club or Aspira federation. Not being Puerto Ricans but other than Puerto Ricans. Dominicans, Colombians, Ecuadorians but mostly the majority were Dominicans. So we were seeing a change in the number of students, their issue, leadership, as so Aspira didn't just started losing its sense of identity as a Puerto Rican agency. That became to happen around the time that I started with Aspira group and see the changes in demographics specially in the Bronx and Brooklyn office. You could see it happening more and more. The other thing is (something groups, could not understand) were not student. They came knowing that Aspira had resources, they came and tap into our resources, they weren't students. This was you needed to go to get some opportunities scholarship, financial aid assistance, counseling etc. They were very aggressive in their effort to find, seek help in agencies like Aspira. It became a political battle, not a political but philosophical struggle. How do you try to keep it a Puerto Rican agency, it became clear that that's was not going to be able to happen and we need to make the transition and transform into a Hispanic agency. An agency lead by Puerto Ricans leadership, but an agency that service the need to the greater Hispanic community. (Maxine) What's that

discuss openly by the board? (Him) Oh yea. Their were serious, numerous discussions as to the need to either sustain and support a Puerto Rican driven organization or to open it up to the other Hispanics groups. An it became very clear the changing economic climate (could not understand) dictated that we had no choice but to go on and scope some services in our instate, we had no choice, because funding sources were going to make sure that we were serving all Hispanic (Maxine) Were private funding sources doing that? (Him) Adsolutly. Private sources wanted to make sure that no one was excluded in services to Aspira, no one. (Maxine) Not only government them was making those kinds of demands but private also, surtenly their (could not understand) demographic. (Him) Exactly. (Maxine) So how did that play into the staffing, were you able to find, was it important to find Puerto Rican professionals or were you at that point sort of willing to have any Latino Americano who? (Him) Well, I try, as I told my board, I will make it a priority to hire Puerto Ricans, but if I could not I will not hesitate to hire someone who is qualify. And luckily (could not understand) at the time I was there we still had a lot of young Puerto Ricans coming up the ranks. It wasn't (could not understand). The Aspira clubs were producing graduates were coming out of the schools and coming back from schools to become counselors at Aspira. So we were seeing the benefits of the Aspira process happening, they were graduating with the degrees and coming back and working directly for Aspira. So we were beginning to hire the same people that were going through the Aspira process that we help educated. But that soon became to become, with exception (could not understand) what became to happen was that I became looking at people that were in college on a track to complete the college education because I could not afford to hire graduates, they were not taking my jobs, they were going to work for

government, for the private sector, they were working else where. It was not easy to attract them so we saw a need to have to work with people who were in college, who were college bound who we could then work with, who are going to school at night, (could not understand) And who would work as professionals ladies, counselors, at the entry level as counselors. (Maxine) So actually you were sort of not just employing people on the college track but Aspira became the trainer of source. (Him) We became the training ground, we gave them the opportunity to work and learn the trade that the (could not understand) (Maxine) But you know is so interesting about that, is a fabulist idea but on the discussion we had before this also impact to some extent on the salaries thing. That whole salary thing became a cycle, it just feeds on it self, the money....(Laughter) interesting. (Him) It was absolutely that, money was driving a lot of the difficulties that sustain and supported our institution. It was driving us to make hard decisions in terms of quality of services, consistency in continuity, it impacted us very negatively over the course of my tenure currently, and I think before that. I hear that, while in the years that was always the problems not only in Aspira but in a number of other institution, Puerto Rican Family Institution was in the difficulties. (Maxine) (could not understand) (Him) Every body would know that if you go work there you would (could not understand) because you would not make a whole lot of money. (Maxine) Who were the others non-profits talking about in these years in terms of, I mean for example did you talk regularly with any one let say the Jewish, African American non-profit? Where they going through those kind of issue? What was their advice? (Him) African American non-profit organization when through similar struggles trying to raise the money. However, they were a lot more successful because they have a political base. They have strong

political allies that were also influencing the funding process. They were in their, they had counselors, they had state senators, they had all the Political who were stud, aggressive, and making sure the government dollars were getting down to the communities due through funding grown, through non-profits agencies. (Maxine) If there more of them their were more Africans Americans organization, there are more that there are Puerto Ricans organization or Latinos yet that political claw that became a barrier. (Him) Absolutely, and the credibility of the institution, the NWLCD historically have had the up and down but they always had maintain a high level of credibility through the government and private funding. (Maxine) I need to someone from outside out side organization that my have work with Aspira, would it be something, I don't know who could I talk to? Could it be someone in the (something) liuge or I remember Luis Nines said that he talk to (something) leuge people back in the day when they were sour of forming the associates at that time of period. (Him) I think it could be work while, you might want to get a couple of interesting people in the back them in the 70's working (could not understand) that could be helpful. (Maxine) What about any of these other organization, like you have interacted with any of them, what kind of advice were they giving you? (Him)